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Intelligence officials skeptical of reports of new Soviet defector

By Bill Gertz
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Reports that a senior Soviet intelligence officer defected last year were viewed with skepticism yesterday by intelligence officials and experts.

Intelligence sources told U.S. News & World Report that a high-ranking KGB official, reportedly a major general, was one of five major intelligence defectors from the Soviet bloc last year, the magazine's Feb. 3 edition reports.

The report of the latest high-level KGB defection may refer to a Soviet GRU military intelligence official who defected in 1983, but whose defection has not yet been confirmed by U.S. officials, said one former U.S. intelligence official, speaking on the condition he remain anonymous.

Sen. Patrick Leahy, vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee yesterday, said his panel has been told nothing about a senior KGB defector. However, House Intelligence Committee Chairman Lee Hamilton said he had received a "preliminary report." He declined to comment further until he received a more thorough briefing and said he was "not yet sure about the information."

FBI and CIA spokesmen were unavailable for comment on the reports yesterday.

The magazine said the KGB official supplied secrets to the United States for an unspecified period of time before supposedly escaping last April or May by helicopter from East Germany.

In another incident, Soviet KGB Col. Vitaly Yurchenko defected to the United States last August but returned in November after he claimed the CIA kidnapped him.

U.S. officials remain divided over whether he was a legitimate defector who had second thoughts or, more likely, a "plant" sent by Moscow with a specific mission to disrupt U.S. intelligence agencies by supplying them with misleading information.

The magazine said the CIA refused to comment on defections as a matter of policy.

The agency, did however release a biography of Mr. Yurchenko following his return to the Soviet Union Nov. 2.

The CIA's handling of the affair has lead the administration to review CIA procedures for dealing with defectors. CIA Director William Casey has made changes in the division responsible for defectors, knowledgable sources said.

The defection of the GRU official, according to Turkish press accounts, occurred in September 1983 when a GRU officer identified only as "Lt. Gen. Grishin" left the Soviet Union on a train for Istanbul, Turkey, wearing the uniform of a low-ranking Soviet military officer.

The unnamed KGB official was flown to the U.S., given a new identity and resettled "because of the Yurchenko fiasco."

Intelligence sources said Gen. Grishin was flown out of Turkey on a U.S. military transport to West Germany, then to the United States.

From West Germany, the unnamed KGB official was flown to the United States, given a new identity and resettled in the Midwest "because of the Yurchenko fiasco," the magazine stated.

The sources said the use of a military aircraft signified that the defector was an important Soviet official. Gen. Grishin reportedly supplied U.S. officials with a Soviet contingency plan for military intervention in Iran.

The New York Times, citing congressional sources, reported yesterday that the alleged KGB defector was supplying information described as more valuable than details turned over to the CIA by Mr. Yurchenko.

The newspaper said CIA officials kept the defector under tight security in order not to affect the Geneva summit negatively in November.

It also said that the KGB official was supplying technical information about KGB organization and methods, but did not have information about Soviet agents in the United States.

One intelligence source, who would have known if such a defection occurred, dismissed the reports as unfounded. "If I was trying to circulate a rumor, that's how I would do it," the source said.

Ray Cline, former CIA Deputy Director for Intelligence, said he was skeptical about the reports but added that it is possible the agency had managed to keep the defection secret for so many months since "the Yurchenko case has buttoned everybody up."

"If it's true, it explains why they mer — clearly things were breaking," Mr. Cline said in a telephone interview.

A former CIA counterintelligence specialist who serves as an advisor to the White House on intelligence matters said he doubts very much the reports are valid.

"If there were anything to it, I would have gotten at least an inkling by now," said the official, who spoke on the condition he not be identified.

Another former intelligence official said he was called by U.S. News regarding the defection story and said from his experience the magazine "did not have much" in the way of corroborating information.

"I don't know where that story came from," the former official said.

According to the U.S. News report, the KGB official's defection would be the fifth defection of a high-level Soviet-bloc intelligence officer in 1985. The others were identified as Milan Svec, the deputy resident intelligence officer stationed in the Czechoslovakian embassy who defected May 14; Sergei Bokhan, a GRU officer in Athens who defected May 25; Oleg Gordievsky, Moscow's KGB chief in London who defected last summer, and Mr. Yurchenko.

Staff writer Roger Fontaine contributed to this report

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